

Armed with your foot type and curvature, you're ready to do some shoe shopping. Give the information to a knowledgeable shoe salesperson, and he should be able to recommend just the right shoe for your foot. Or you can do the matching-up yourself.

To find a shoe that has the proper curvature, or last, cut out the foot outline that you traced and take it with you when you go shopping. Hold the outline against the bottom of each shoe that you like. You'll be able to tell which shoe is going to fit your foot comfortably. (You'll also be able to check to see whether a shoe is long enough and wide enough for you.)

To make sure that a shoe is appropriate for your foot type, look for the following features.

Rigid: Rigid feet are very stiff and tend to have high arches. They're stable, but they don't handle impact well. For this foot type, you need a shoe that is very well-cushioned, because your arch is not going to flex and provide much cushioning for you. You also need an upper that has a lot of volume, or space, to accommodate your high instep. You may have tight Achilles tendons (at the backs of your ankles), so you'll want your shoe to have a bit of a heel. Most rigid feet are curved, so a shoe with a curved last will fit better.

Neutral: This foot type is the easiest to fit. A neutral foot has normal mobility, which means it lengthens or spreads about half a shoe size when bearing weight (when you stand up, for example). It absorbs shock well and has good stability. You can get by with less support, although a little extra won't hurt either. For a neutral foot, a shoe with a semi-curved last should fit well.

Flexible: Of the three foot types, flexible feet are the most complicated and most difficult to fit. They absorb shock well because they are so mobile, but that mobility tends to make them unstable. They change one whole size when bearing weight. They also tend to be flat and have a low in-step. If you have flexible feet, look for shoes with low volume -- meaning, little distance from the laces to the soles. You don't need a lot of cushioning, but you do need a lot of support. You also need a low heel, which will do a better job of stabilizing your foot. You may feel most comfortable in a shoe with a straight last, as your foot tends to flatten and straighten out when you walk.

Brands That Measure Up

As I said before, there is a shoe out there for every foot. So don't settle for less than a perfect fit. Expect to pay between \$55 and \$85 for a good-quality, good-fitting pair of walking shoes. If the price seems high, consider the cost of an appointment with a podiatrist or orthopedist. You're worth the expense, and so are your shoes.

Go to a store that carries a wide variety of brands and styles, so you have the best chance of finding the right shoes for your feet. Once you've selected a pair, you can go to other stores to see if you can get the same brand and style for less. Keep your eyes peeled for sales and discounts.

I'm not going to tell you my favorite brands and styles, because they may not be the

best for your feet. But I can tell you a little about some of the major manufacturers.

New Balance is considered to be a leader among manufacturers of footwear. They make lots of sizes and widths to fit all kinds of feet. They also have styles for every foot type.

Easy Spirit is for women only. Their shoes are best for rigid or neutral feet, with styles that tend to be a bit softer and more flexible than those of other brands.

Saucony walking shoes are known for their ability to keep people from overpronating. They have a special insert that acts like a soft orthotic, which provides great arch support. (An orthotic is a device that holds your foot in a biomechanically correct position.)

Other big names in the walking-shoe industry include Ryka, Etonic, Naturalsport, Nike, Reebok, Adidas, Wilson, Brooks, Rockport, and Asics. Some of these brands, like Nike, are available only in B widths. Other brands are available in a variety of widths, but stores don't bother to stock them. If a store doesn't carry the style that you want in the width that will fit you best, don't hesitate to order a pair. You still get to try them on when they come in. Don't let an overeager salesperson try to persuade you otherwise.

So, wise consumer, go forth with your new shoe knowledge and shop. Once you've gotten your feet into some serious walking shoes, you're ready to begin a serious walking program.